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## CHEERING A LADY

By LISA YSAYE

I AM very sad to-day," said the Lady in Blue, "and my thoughts are for once all gray, gray thoughts. Don't ask me why it is so; there is no reason; but the dark mood has me in its power, and it seems to me that Life consists only of forlorn hopes, of insatiable desires, and of restless yearnings. Even this blazing fire here cannot warm and cheer me."

"Would a nice book be of any help?" suggested the Gentleman in Gray.

But the Lady in Blue shook her head.

"No. It is part of this *malaise* of the spirit that the most beloved books seem old, and hollow, and flat, and of no interest. I think with Mallarme: '*La chair est triste, hélas! Et j'ai lu tous les livres.*' Altogether I feel just like Helen of Troy, of whom Leonardo da Vinci tells. She looked in her mirror, and seeing the withered wrinkles made in her face by old age, wept, and wondered why she had twice been carried away. I wonder too. Not that any one has ever carried me away—I have no complaints to make on this score; but I wonder how I could ever think life sweet and the day bright, and the winds of heaven full of softness and delight. To-day the world is gray. '*Il pleut sur le toit—et il pleut dans mon cœur.*'"

"If I should tell you something very gay, would that not cheer your mood a little?" asked the Gentleman in Gray.

But the Lady in Blue energetically refused such help.

"That is the worst you could do," she said. "Do you think that a crying child is cheered when it sees all the other children laughing? Certainly not. But when all the other little boys and girls also start

to weep in the most dolorous way, then the first weeper derives at least a little satisfaction. So if you want to tell me anything at all, tell me the saddest story you can think of. Tell me of the friendless and the unloved, the baffled and the broken, the disappointed and the insignificant. I do not want to listen to anything else."

"The saddest story I know," said the Gentleman in Gray, "is the story of *l'homme rouge et la femme verte*—the story of the red man and the green woman. It is a play I saw once in one of the little theaters in Paris, and the utter hopelessness of the plot has haunted me ever since."

"Very well," said the Lady in Blue, nestling comfortably in her deep chair, "tell it to me. And I must confess that the prospect of hearing something exceedingly sad makes me feel very much happier at once."

And after adjusting the lights and stirring the fire the Gentleman in Gray told her:—

"Imagine somewhere in the most dismal slums of a great and pitiless city a vile and reeking saloon. In this saloon, at the stained and dirty bar, stand among other outcasts two derelicts—a man and a woman—in tattered rags, and so broken and forlorn-looking that even the drunkards and *apaches* who crowd in this desolate haunt of vice chaff them and make sport of them. The man sips absinthe, the woman has asked for blood-red wine, and, while they drink, one of the company tells them that they would make a charming pair and that they really ought to marry. But both of them reject this idea almost fiercely, and both of them confess

to an ideal, which, strange to say, they cherish in spite of all their degradation, in spite of all their vileness and their filth. The woman says: 'Yes, if I could find a man fiery and red as this wine, then, then I could love. *L'homme rouge*—it is of him that I dream when I wander through the dust of the streets, or sleep with the dogs in some out-house of the farms. But I never find him, this red man—the world is all gray.' And the man again calls for a green woman, green and mysterious as the absinthe that has enslaved him. If he could but find her—*la femme verte*—then he would love, then he would adore. 'But it is not this earth that harbors so wonderful a being.' And while all laugh boisterously at such mad dreams, the two derelicts wander away into the night and all the terrors of the darkness.

"They wandered away in opposite directions, but as they stray, drunk and half-crazed, through the city that had no shelter for them, they happen to meet again just in front of a chemist's shop, which, as you know, has two colored and glowing glass balls over the door—one red and the other green. And chance wills it that the woman should stand under the green glass ball, and the man under the red. They look up, and halt, trembling with astonishment—each sees his dream standing before him; the woman—*l'homme rouge*; the man—*la femme verte*. And then they passionately thank Fate for this wonder—they are jubilant that their dreams were not all in vain, that life is not quite a fraud, that the ideal exists and can be found, even if very late and at the end of a most bitter road. Full of an ecstatic happiness, they step forward to embrace, but while they do so they leave the magic circle of the red and green lights, and they stand before each other as that which they really are—two squalid and hopeless derelicts. *L'homme rouge* and *la*

*femme verte* have disappeared forever, and the outcasts turn and wander away, only more desolate, more broken than ever before."

The Gentleman in Gray had finished his story, and looked at the Lady in Blue. "Was it sad enough?" he asked.

"Yes," said the Lady in Blue, "it is very, very sad, and it has cheered me wonderfully. And besides this it brings back a truth which, sometimes, I must confess, I am apt to forget."

"And will you impart to me the moral which you found in my little tale?" begged the Gentleman in Gray.

"Oh, it is not a moral, it is wisdom," said the Lady in Blue. "Your tale has shown me that—if one should ever happen to be—*la femme verte* to any one, it is most dangerous to make the slightest move. One must stand quietly and aloof in the magic light of a green distance, never to be bridged, and no disappointment will ever mar the ideal which one represents. That may be a difficult art, but it is one—"

"Which you understand perfectly," interrupted the Gentleman in Gray, who seemed a little ruffled.

But the Lady in Blue laughed and said: "Thank you so much. That was the one thing needed to make me feel quite happy again. You really understand most charmingly how to cheer me up, and if I should ever again feel the dark mood stealing over me, I shall at once appeal to you."

Yet the Gentleman in Gray did not seem gratified. He said rather ceremoniously that he had to leave, and bowed himself out, not knowing that the Lady in Blue sat long by the fire, smiling at his picture that looked quite red in the glare of the flames.

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